External Funding: The Discussion has Commenced

In the Secretary General Column that was included in the issue 5/00 of the CIB Information Bulletin it was suggested that attracting external funding was becoming ever more important as condition for initiating certain types of CIB Activities. Examples were given of CIB Task Groups and Working Commissions who’s work in fact largely depends on external funding and of CIB Activities that are part of the CIB Pro-Active Approach. Specifically the CIB proposal for the establishment of an EU funded Thematic Network PeBBu – Performance Based Building was mentioned. In the section on the Pro-Active Approach as included in this issue of the CIB Information Bulletin an update on this last project is included from which it can be concluded that the EU has provisionally accepted this PeBBu Proposal.

This column in 5/00 was offered for comments to persons in the CIB community who in line with their position are more actively involved with funding issues and how those may related to CIB. Hereafter follow their responses.

- Response by Sherif Barakat, CIB Board Member and proposed next CIB President:

   The need for funding is not new. Even voluntary participation has to be funded (by the employer). What changed is the funding mix of the employer’s organizations and the accompanied change of priorities and mode of operation; thus the need for external funding. It has proved most successful (e.g. in the IEA experience) that individual participants find their national funding (from their organization or others with the mandate of the work area). This represents a significant leverage of the national resources (and can be sold on this basis) for a common and significant outcome.

   Jointly funded projects (money collected and managed by an operating agent) have several challenges and problems to deal with; not the least is the uncertainty of national budgets/annual contributions.

   If CIB is to take the role of funding agency, the money for such funding will have to come mainly from additional sources (e.g. the EU, the World Bank, etc.) and not from the membership fee. This would increase the value of CIB without objection from members that feel no interest in the funded project (that is if funded from "their" membership). In addition, this would strengthen CIB financial viability without adding another pressure to raise fees. However, CIB will have to look for a combination of sources of funding that would allow participation by any member. This and the management of the funds require significant
investment in resources and a new look at the CIB organization and Secretariat. If it is to be expected that the funding issue will become important in the context of the CIB mode of operation this requires an in-depth discussion amongst the CIB Management and with the CIB Membership.

- Response by Peter Barrett, CIB Board Member and Coordinator of Working Commission W065 on Organization and Management of Construction:

In May 1998 W065 went through a lengthy debate to clarify its strategy. It concluded that it was a "sleeping giant" in terms of unrealized potential and has since set up a series of project working groups to exploit the tremendous synergy of a diverse international group of researchers. In the same strategy debate the members also strongly commended the relaxed, social approach of CIB, which was seen to be very important to the unique research community building role of the CIB. It was, however, also clear that relying on donated free time was a major constraint, but members were sensitive about funded activities and felt this avenue should only be explored carefully.

Extrapolating to the organization as a whole, the CIB is clearly confronted with a complicated situation. It needs to maintain its friendly, research community building ethos, but, to be the leading international construction research organization, it can't just rely on members' goodwill to create the stream of authoritative outputs needed to underpin its reputation. This could be construed as a matter of "either/or", but I feel strongly that it actually has to be "and". Without the research community aspect of the CIB the reservoir of research-based ideas and possibilities would be impoverished. Without a more managed and resourced approach to creating high quality outputs on key issues the full potential of the enormous collective knowledge available will go unseen.

The question is, therefore, how to develop this new targeted, managed and funded aspect of the CIB so that it creates the desired synergies with the CIB research communities. Such synergies could be the ability of an organization like the CIB to win funding at an international level; the impact on key decision makers of high quality international publications, the potential to attract key participants to focussed international meetings, and, based on all of these, the consequent enhancement of the reputations of all involved in the CIB.

It seems clear that the CIB must navigate unchartered waters and to do this it must feel its way carefully. Doing nothing is not an option, but doing something and rapidly learning from it, and then doing some more, is the right way forward. Dr Bakens, the CIB Secretary General was instructed by the CIB Administrative Committee at its meeting in China in 2000 to start to build up the CIB's research income. This he has done. This is the first step. We are beginning to learn already. This is a spectacular success for which Dr Bakens should be commended, but we must remember, as the lessons are extracted from this new experience, that focus and funding must be twinned with community and camaraderie.

- Response by Roger Courtney, CIB Vice President and Coordinator of Task Group TG47 on Innovation Brokerage in Construction:

The trend towards having external funding for international liaison, identified in the Secretary General's article "Funding: a requirement for CIB activities?", has been apparent for some years. It is closely linked to the move away from 'basic' funding of building research and the increasing use of contracts - even in the university sector - which require researchers to produce defined
outputs. Contract funding normally makes little provision for maintaining the researchers' knowledge of their subject.

We should both welcome and be wary of this trend. We welcome it because it is a reflection of the role of building research, as it matures, in addressing real issues that matter to public bodies and industry - hence the contracts. We should be wary when the contracts, often let through competitive processes, leave no scope for free enquiry or provide no surplus for maintaining professional capabilities. The value of the insights that can come from liaison with peers in other countries is not easily incorporated in a contract, and yet we all know that most research is carried out in countries other than our own and that therefore there is much to be learned through international networking.

So both CIB and its members need to make explicit the value offered by international links and fortunately some funding is now expressly linked to international activities. CIB has secured funding from the European Commission; TG47 will be supported by one of the Research Councils in the UK. Pressures on national funding agencies will cause them to look for collaboration with other countries and CIB members will be well placed to broker and implement such links. Funding dedicated to international activities will grow, and CIB is well placed to be a focus for it.

But, as Wim Bakens points out, such funding will itself be focussed. It will require researchers to produce outputs. Even CIB, in the Pro-active Approach, has placed contracts and expected value from them. Finding the balance between the freedoms that lead to radically new insights and the disciplines that assure funders will not be easy. I hope that CIB, in its new role as the manager of networking funding, will demonstrate an enlightened balance.

- Response by Larry Little, Chairman of the CIB Programme Committee:

It seems we are all in agreement that we need to change and must do so in a sensitive fashion. Hopefully the Congress and new Board will celebrate the successes of the last few years and endorse a forward direction of CIB and yourself being opportunistic in seeking and assisting members in obtaining research contracts. The policy details can be filled in as we learn from the experiences.

- Response by Rodney Milford, Chairman of the CIB Publications Committee:

The Secretary General’s Column on increasing direct funding of CIB activities reflects a combination of several inter-related factors. In the early 1990’s, the CIB set itself a strategic objective to enhance its impact in the international science and technology community – which resulted in amongst others the CIB’s Pro-active Approach. But the Pro-active Approach requires additional resources and direct funding for it to be successful – and in particular funding from outside of the individual Member organizations. Wim Bakens was therefore instructed to explore opportunities for accessing funding sources, and Wim needs to be congratulated on results achieved to date. The increasing ability of the CIB to access funding is already showing demonstrable results in terms of the CIB’s objective of enhancing its impact in the international science and technology community – which itself translates into enhanced benefits to CIB Members. Furthermore, worldwide, there is an increasing trend (or necessity) for R&D organizations and Universities to access additional sources of income to support their own R&D activities. The trend of increasing direct funding of CIB activities which creates opportunities for Member
organizations to leverage their own resources, is therefore also a reflection of the responsiveness of the CIB to Member’s needs. Notwithstanding the very encouraging trends to date, the CIB is only at the start of this journey of increasing direct funding of CIB activities. There is still much to be learnt, for example, about accessing and leveraging funding for CIB projects; contracting and risk management; managing and monitoring the delivery of CIB projects (including managing projects involving two or more Member organizations); the resource requirements of the General Secretariat; and so on. But the only way to achieve this learning is through informed decision making and through experience. The CIB, and the General Secretariat in particular, have accepted this challenge with responsibility.

Particular attention however needs to be paid to a possible change in the culture of the CIB. While the trend of increasing direct funding of CIB activities is to be welcomed – the CIB must not become a “contract R&D organization” in itself. The CIB must fulfil many Member needs, one of which must increasingly be that of an organization that leverages the individual Member organization’s ability to access funding. But the CIB itself must not be seen as the source of funding for Member organizations.

But perhaps most importantly, the CIB must still remain a network that provides an opportunity for the interchange of information and ideas, for social interaction, and for developing and maintaining long-term friendships.

It is an important and an exciting journey that the CIB has embarked on that will enhance the CIB’s impact in the international community and one that will enhance Member benefits. The trend of increasing direct funding of CIB activities is one that should be welcomed.